

The Fire Inside

Newsletter of the California Coalition for Women Prisoners

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Drop LWOP!



Artist: Billie Simões Belo

On Friday Aug. 18, 2017, Governor Brown granted nine commutations. Of the nine commutations, five are for people serving Life Without Parole (LWOP) sentences, including Mary Elizabeth Stroder, who has served 22 years at Central California Women's Facility (CCWF) and who works closely with CCWP. The Governor commuted her sentence to 25 years to life, making her eligible to go before the parole board. The other four people are serving sentences of varying lengths.

These commutations follow the 7 other commutations granted by the Governor on April 15, 2015, including that of longtime prisoner rights advocate Kenneth Hartman and CCWP member Susan Russo, who were both serving LWOP sentences. It is significant that the Governor has issued these commutations outside of the traditional holiday timeline of Christmas or Easter. Ms. Russo had a parole hearing on Sept. 7, 2017; the

Board asked for additional information, so Sue will return to Board in six months.

Governor Brown is reaching the end of his final term in office and he is taking steps that draw attention to the injustice of Life Without Parole sentencing. The tremendous amount of advocacy by people serving LWOP, family members and other advocates outside prison is having an important impact. In one of his commutation letters, the Governor specifically acknowledged the significance of all of the work being done by people serving LWOP sentences and by CCWP. He is paying attention to letters and petitions supporting individuals who have applied for commutation.

So let's amp up the advocacy! To join us in our #Drop LWOP campaign and to advocate for an end to LWOP, please contact CCWP at info@womenprisoners.org.

- Participate in our postcard campaign directed to Governor Brown by requesting postcards and gathering signatures. CCWP created postcards that highlight the racial and gender disparity in LWOP sentencing and call on Governor Brown to continue to grant commutations for the over 200 people in CA women's prisons currently serving LWOP.
- Sign our letter directed to the Governor, that calls on him to commute the sentences for all of the over 5000 people currently serving LWOP in CA prisons.
- People commuted to parole-eligible sentences need community support to better their chances of receiving parole. If you or your organization can offer concrete forms of support to people upon release, please reach out to CCWP.
- Stay tuned for an upcoming Town Hall in the Bay Area on the campaign to #Drop LWOP.
- Learn more about our LWOP through our ongoing storytelling project, *A Living Chance: Storytelling to End Life Without Parole* at www.alivingchance.com.

Let's work together to end this cruel "living death" sentence in CA state prisons and give our loved one's a living chance for freedom! ■

A continuación verán varias propuestas que fueron aprobadas a ley recientemente.

SCR 48 - Cambio a Regla de Delito Asesinato

El 14 de setiembre del 2017, la Resolución Concurrente de Senado 48 (siglas en ingles SCR 48) paso por la Asamblea de CA, y fue aprobada en el senado en junio. SCR 48, fue creada por los senadores Nancy Skinner (Dem.) y Joel Anderson (Rep.), y es el primer paso en el proceso legislativo para eliminar completamente la Regla de Delito Asesinato del Código Penal de CA. Esto es un reconocimiento importante por una mayoría de legisladores del senado, diciendo que la Regla de Delito Asesinato es injusta, la cual ha que a hecho que mucha gente termine con penas de prisión excesivas por crímenes que no cometieron. El siguiente paso se espera para enero del 2018, cuando la nueva sesión legislativa comience y se proponga una revisión del código penal.

AB 1308 – Libertad Condicional para Delincuentes Juveniles

AB 1308 extiende Libertad Condicional para Delincuentes Juveniles (SB 260 y 261) a personas que tengan hasta 25 años o menores en el momento cuando ocurrió el delito por el que fueron sentenciados/as. Esta propuesta requerirá que los comisionados de la Junta de Audiencias de Libertad Condicional presten mayor atención a las audiencias que se llevaran acabo para jóvenes delincuentes sentenciadas/os a cadena perpetua indeterminada. Ahora que el gobernador Brown aprobó esta propuesta a ley el 11 de octubre 2017, aplaudimos este importante cambio a la ley, pues ahora se esta reconociendo que las personas que están en transición de joven a adulto requieren de mayor protección y oportunidades especiales y que tienen una tremenda capacidad para crecer y madurar.

SB 394 – Asegurar la Oportunidad de Libertad Condicional para los Menores de 18 Años.

El gobernador Brown aprobó este proyecto de ley el 11 de octubre del 2017, y es una gran victoria y un paso hacia la justicia para aquellos afectados/as y sentenciados/as a cadena perpetua cuando eran menores de los 18 años. Esta ley SB 394, hace que aquellos/as que han sido sentenciados/as a cadena perpetua sin libertad condicional por delitos cometidos cuando eran menores de los 18 años, sean elegibles para la Libertad Condicional para Delincuentes Juveniles cuando hayan cumplido 25 años de encarcelamiento.

Santuario. Cuando la mayoría de las personas escuchan esta palabra piensan en una iglesia, mezquita, templo o algún otro lugar de veneración o alabanza. Otrxs pensarán en seguridad, paz y tranquilidad. Entonces como podríamos hablar de santuario y prisión en la misma oración? Parecieran polos opuestos. Pero para aquellxs que debemos vivir encarceladxs en prisión por años, santuario podría ser desarrollado de muchas maneras - una capilla, por medio del arte, música, jardinería, amor y cuidado de animales y naturaleza; por medio de servir y cuidar de otrxs en tu comunidad. Dentro de toda esta edición de "Fire Inside" vas a encontrar palabras, arte y poesía de personas viviendo en CCWF y CIW (Facilidad de Mujeres en el Centro de California e Institución para Mujeres en California por sus siglas en ingles), compartiendo sus ideas de santuario. Sus palabras de bondad, escogencia, tolerancia, verdad, surgimiento, y comunidad se repiten continuamente y son el centro del concepto de santuario para muchxs de nosotrxs .

A pesar de esta fuerza positiva así como los años de defensoría para derechos, aun estamos viendo un alarmante incremento en suicidios y crisis en el cuidado para la salud mental para mujeres y personas trans en las prisiones de CA. En agosto de 2017, el Auditor del Senado proporcionó un reporte de políticas hacia la prevención de suicidios en todas las prisiones del CDCR (Departamento de Corrección y Rehabilitación de California por sus siglas en ingles), y así condenando el incremento en suicidios en CIW (ver pag. 10). También el 7 de setiembre del 2017, la corte fijó a un "Master Especial" supervisando que CDCR siguiera al pie con la demanda judicial colectiva de Coleman

Here are a few of the important bills that were recently signed into law.

SCR 48, Felony Murder Rule Change

On Sept. 14, 2017 Senate Concurrent Resolution 48 (SCR 48) passed in the CA Assembly. It was approved in the Senate last June. SCR 48, authored by Senators Nancy Skinner (Dem.) and Joel Anderson (Rep.), is the first step in the legislative process to completely eliminate the Felony Murder Rule from the CA Penal Code. This is an important acknowledgement by a majority of State legislators that the Felony Murder Rule is unjust and has led to so many people being sentenced to draconian prison terms for crimes they did not commit (see more info on page 13). The next step will be in January 2018, when the new legislative session begins and a revision of the criminal code can be proposed.

AB 1308- Youth Offender Parole

AB 1308 extends Youth Offender Parole (SB 260 and 261) to people who were up to age 25 at the time of a crime for which they were sentenced. This bill will require the parole board to conduct youth offender parole hearings for people sentenced to indeterminate life terms. It will be an important change to law, recognizing that transition age youth/young adults deserve special opportunities and protections. Governor Brown signed AB 1308 into law on October 11, 2017.

SB 394-Youth LWOP Bill

The passage of SB 394 is a huge victory and a step forward towards justice, affecting people who were sentenced to LWOP when they were under 18 years old. SB 394 will make people sentenced to LWOP for crimes that occurred under the age of 18 eligible for Youth Offender Parole at 25 years of incarceration. While there is no guarantee of parole, SB 394 provides a living chance to some people serving LWOP. Governor Brown signed SB 394 into law on October 11, 2017. ■

Prop 57 Update

On July 14, 2017 the CDCR released its proposed regulations to implement the Credit Earning and Parole Consideration portions of Prop 57. CDCR chose to disregard recommendations submitted by a coalition of groups, including CCWP. Instead the proposed regulations limit access to the benefits of Prop 57. Most significantly they don't apply retroactively and they don't apply to anyone with a third strike.

During the public comment period which ended on September 1, advocates submitted more than 8,500 letters recommending changes to the regulations. At CIW, women and trans prisoners collected 607 signatures on a letter stating that the proposed regulations "are unfair to the socioeconomically disadvantaged inmates and those who have taken the initiative to improve and rehabilitate their lives prior to the creation of this proposition."

The CIW letter takes issue with the CDCR's argument that it would take too much "time, staff and resources" to apply the regulations retroactively. "While it is true that the retroactive granting of milestone completion credits will require a great deal of resources, the early release of more than 80,000 inmates would more than make up

for the resources involved..." The letter points out that lack of retroactivity particularly impacts elder prisoners since, "They're less able to complete Milestones they have once completed due to cognitive and/or physical limitations related to their aging process."

On September 1 over one hundred people attended the CDCR hearing about the regulations. They spoke together in a unified voice declaring that the regulations did not represent the intent of Prop 57. Due to the overwhelming opposition to the proposed regulations, CDCR decided they needed more time to review and modify their proposal, an important victory. CCWP hopes that CDCR will change the regulations to reflect the input of people inside, their loved ones and advocates.

Award the credits retroactively! Include people with three strikes sentences for early parole eligibility! Mandate that CDCR work with service providers, people who are incarcerated and their families to revisit issues related to implementation of Prop 57 twice a year in order to identify and address barriers to participation.

■

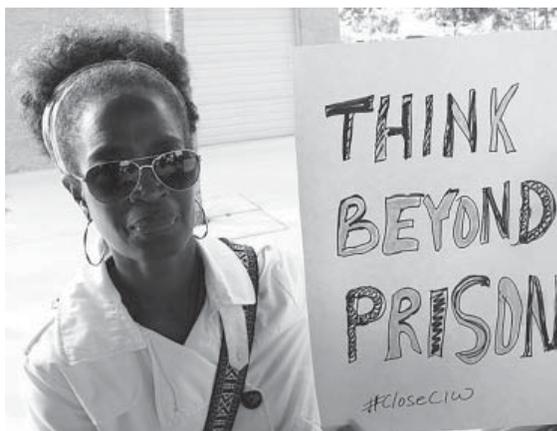
efectuado en 1995 (protegiendo a todos los que requieran de cuidados de salud mental en prisión), emitiendo su último reporte en la prevención de suicidios en las prisiones de CA. El reporte de el Master Especial también notaba significantes problemas en las practicas para la prevención de suicidios de CIW, así como deficiencias en proporcionar cuidados básicos para salud mental.

Aun el Gobierno Federal – en un estudio de junio del 2017 emitido por la Oficina de Estadísticas de Justicia – le reconoció a la Coalición Californiana de Mujeres Prisioneras (CCWP) que mas de dos tercios de mujeres encarceladas en los Estados Unidos reportaron tener historial en problemas mentales - un porcentaje mucho mayor que el reportado en prisiones de hombres. Lo que este reporte no entiende es la diferencia de genero dentro de la historia de abuso – física, emocional, sexual – al que las mujeres y personas trans son sometidas antes de llegar a prisión, y que es aquí que se incrementan y se empeoran por las condiciones dentro de ella.

Todo esto nos hace preguntarnos cómo podrían, si tan solo pudieran, proporcionar un programa bueno y compasivo para la salud mental cuando las personas se encuentran en una jaula. Los problemas mentales son reales, pero una sociedad que irrespete y menosprecia a tanta gente por ideas de raza, genero, clase social, estatus migratorio – y hace que el cuidado sea tan difícil de acceder para muchos, también hace que la gente este mas enferma. Un buen cuidado comienza con mucho apoyo, respeto y dignidad para todo aquel que vive con problemas mentales y que incluya a todas las personas que están encarceladas también. Cambiando a la fuerza a personas que sufren esto desde hace mucho, medicando para tratar con eficiencia, o tratando de forzar programas estandarizados de prisión a gente que tiene graves problemas mentales, reduciendo el numero de técnicos psiquiátricos mientras al mismo tiempo se aísla a las personas de amigos y familia cuando sufren alguna crisis, NO son ejemplo de tratamientos humanitarios para mejorar la salud mental.

Apenas una semana después que el Auditor Estatal emitiera el reporte para la prevención al suicidio, otra persona de CIW se suicido. Debido a tantos años luchando por justicia por las personas desde adentro de la cárcel, miembros de sus familias y otras personas preocupadas en esta lucha, el Guardián encargado no podía simplemente bloquear la unidad y a la prisión. Entonces el Guardián encargado llamo a grupos con experiencia y fuerza dentro de la prisión, y pidió al grupo de Compañerxs Compasivxs (un grupo de apoyo dentro y con prisioneras) y la WAC (Consejo de Consulta de Mujeres por sus siglas en ingles) a que le ayudaran. Todxs lograron así llorar y apoyarse unxs a otrxs – una manera de desarrollar santuario en medio de la tragedia.

La gente dentro siempre se forma familia, comunidad, y santuario para poder sobrevivir crecer y apoyarse unxs a otrxs . Es la única manera que la gente que sufre de algún mal o discapacidad a logrado salir adelante. Se han escrito guías para lxs sobrevivientes de suicidios, se han desarrollado y capacitado grupos de apoyo. Miembros de familia y otros grupos de apoyo en el exterior han protestado, testificado en juicios, han hecho reuniones con legisladores y oficiales de la CDCR, han hecho llamadas telefónicas y también escrito. Todxs necesitamos tomar acción hacia la justicia y demandar que nuestros seres queridos sean tratados con dignidad y respeto, y que tengan acceso a un cuidado apropiado para su seguridad y bienestar. ■



Romarilyn Ralston at the CIW Vigil in June 2017

Sanctuary. When most people hear this word they think of a church, mosque, temple or some other place of worship. Others think of safety, peace, tranquility. So how in the world can we talk about sanctuary and prison in the same sentence? They seem polar opposites. But for those who must live behind prison walls for years upon years, sanctuary may be created in many different ways—the chapel, through art, music, gardening, love and care of animals and nature; through providing caring and service to other’s in your community. Throughout this issue of *The Fire Inside* you will find the words, art and poetry of people living in CCWF and CIW, sharing their visions of sanctuary. The words kindness, choice, resilience, truth, rising above, and community are repeated often, and are at the heart of this concept of sanctuary for so many of us.

In spite of this positive strength and many years of ongoing advocacy, we are still facing a frightening increase in suicides and a crisis in mental health care for women and trans people in CA women’s prisons. In August 2017, the State Auditor released a report on suicide prevention and policy in all CDCR prisons, soundly condemning the suicide spike at CIW (see p. 10). And on September 7th, the court appointed “Special Master” overseeing CDCR compliance with the 1995 class action Coleman lawsuit (protecting everyone requiring any mental health care in CA prisons) issued their latest report on suicide prevention in CA prisons. This report also noted significant problems in CIW’s suicide prevention practices and mental health care.

Even the federal government – in a June 2017 study issued by the Bureau of Justice Statistics- acknowledges that more than two-thirds of incarcerated women California Coalition for Women Prisoners

in the U.S. reported having a history of mental health problems — a much higher percentage than reported by men in prison. What this report doesn’t understand is the gender disparity in the history of abuse- physical, emotional, sexual—that women and trans people experience before they get to prison, and that is then made ever so much worse by the conditions in prison.

This raises the question of how do you, if you even can, provide good, compassionate mental health care when people are in a cage. Mental illness is real, but a society that disrespects and demeans so many people- based on race, gender, class, immigration status—and makes care and treatment so hard for so many to access, also makes people sicker. Good care starts with support, respect and dignity for all who live with any mental health problem and that includes all people who are incarcerated as well. Forcibly changing a person’s long-term effectively-working psych meds, trying to force standard prison programming on people with long-term mental illness, and reducing the number of psych techs while isolating people in mental health crisis from friends and family are NOT examples of humane mental health care.

Barely one week after the State Auditor’s suicide prevention report was released, another person at CIW committed suicide. Because of the years of advocacy by people inside, family members and other advocates, the Warden could not just lock the unit and prison down. Instead, the Warden called on the experience and strength inside the prison, and asked Compassionate Companions (a trained prisoner-peer support group) and the WAC to help. People were given the chance to gather, mourn and support each other-- a way of building sanctuary in the face of this tragedy.

People inside have always built family, community, and sanctuary to survive and grow and support each other. It is the only way people living with any kind of illness or disability have made it through. Suicide survivor guides have been written, peer training and support groups flourished. Family members and other advocates outside prison have demonstrated, testified at hearings, met with legislative and CDCR officials, written and called. We all need to step up our advocacy and demand that our loved ones be treated with dignity and respect, with appropriate care for their safety and wellbeing. ■

Free Ny Nourn!

In May 2017, Ny Nourn was released from CCWF due to community organizing that helped her win parole. After 16 years in prison for a crime she did not commit, Ny was immediately detained by the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and held in a detention center to face deportation proceedings. Now, even though she has been granted parole, the 36-year-old will be stripped of her residency status and faces deportation to Cambodia—a country she has never been to, has no known relatives in Cambodia, and speaks a little but does not read or write the Khmer language.

On Aug. 11, 2017, the immigration court in San Francisco heard Ms. Nourn's case. Over 40 people came to support Ny, wearing purple t-shirts. The guards found this support so threatening, they tried—but did not succeed—to bar supporters from entering the building. Ms. Nourn testified that her former boyfriend is still threatening to kill her; telling her that given the state of corruption in Cambodia, he can have her killed there for about \$100. He has contact in South East Asia and Ms. Nourn believes him. She has support in the U.S. and would be much safer. Her only "crime" was falling for the wrong man.

During the hearing Ms. Nourn recounted some of her history. Nourn's life has been shaped by violence since birth. In 1980, she was born in a refugee camp in Thailand after her mother fled the war and genocide in Cambodia. Five years later, Ny and her mother came to the United States as refugees. Her stepfather in the U.S. was abusive verbally, emotionally and physically and very controlling. Ny was taught to be quiet, passive and submissive, witnessing her mother being abused.

At 17-years-old, Ny met a man online. He claimed to be in his early twenties, but was actually 34. While initially he was charming, loving, and offering security, he soon became controlling and abusive. When she questioned him, he threatened to kill her. When Ms. Nourn tried to leave him and got a restraining order, he demanded she drop it or he threatened to hurt her family. They were both jailed for a murder he committed. He threatened to hire

someone to kill her, her attorney and her family unless she took full responsibility for the murder.

In 2003, Ms. Nourn was convicted of first-degree murder and sentenced to life without parole. She appealed, submitting expert reports stating that she suffered from Battered Women's Syndrome, and was resentenced to 15 years to life. From there, she worked hard to win her parole. While in prison, Ny learned more about domestic violence, about the cycles of abuse. Ny was determined to help others who have been abused to become survivors, not victims. She was pursuing certification as a substance abuse counselor while in prison, and wants to work with other women survivors of abuse in the community.



Ms. Nourn is sharing her story, not only to secure her freedom but also to bring attention to the ways in which domestic violence can be a pathway to incarceration and, for many immigrants, deportation. "For me to speak my truth is helpful," she has said. "I just want to help the next person."

At the end of September, an immigration judge granted Ny Nourn protection from deportation. Yet ICE refuses to release her and plans to appeal. Here is how you can help:

1. Donate to Ny's bond fund. Ny will be eligible for a bond hearing in November. bit.ly/Bond4Ny
2. Call ICE and tell them to drop their appeal and release Ny: ICE - Office of the Chief Counsel (415) 705-4604 and say, "I am calling to ask that ICE drop its appeal for Ny Nourn (A027 752 551). As a survivor of domestic violence, Ny was properly granted protection from continued violence." Or Call ICE - Enforcement and Removal Operations: (415) 844-5564 and say, "I am calling to ask that ICE release Ny Nourn (A027 752 551) from detention. Ny has been granted relief and should be granted freedom."
3. Sign the petition: actionnetwork.org/petitions/help-release-a-domestic-violence-survivor ■

No Bans, No Walls, Sanctuary for All!



Veronica Zepeda and her children

Since Trump took office, the Federal government has escalated its attacks on immigrant communities. Banning entry to the United States for people from eight countries, eliminating DACA, and increasing the number of ICE arrests by 43% are just some of the ways that the Trump administration has implemented its anti-immigrant agenda.

On the other hand, communities have come together in many ways to resist these assaults and immigrant people being held in detention centers have stood up against abominable conditions, fighting for their dignity and freedom.

In June 2017, a group of nearly 30 women detained by ICE at California's Adelanto Detention Facility (run by GEO, the private prison group) started a hunger strike to protest their poor treatment. They demanded better medical care, lower bond amounts, to be reunited with

their children and families, and to be treated with basic respect by the guards. The Northwest Detention Center in Tacoma, also run by GEO through a contract with ICE, has seen a series of hunger strikes since Spring 2017 to protest terrible conditions which include the rampant use of solitary confinement and guard assaults on detainees.

On July 20, 2017 a remarkable collection of persons gathered in front of the ICE offices in San Francisco to urge ICE to release Veronica Zepeda from Mesa Verde Detention facility in Bakersfield, CA. Ms. Zepeda has a serious heart condition and the guards have not allowed her to get medical care. Veronica escaped death threats from gangs in her native El Salvador by going to Mexico. Veronica sent a greeting to the gathering on July 20th:

"I say this from my heart: I am an abused woman, but I am here looking for the opportunity to move forward for my beautiful children, whom I love so much....My life has changed so much in detention. I'm afraid to lose my life here in the Mesa Verde Detention Center. During the past six months that I have been here, I have had three mild heart attacks and several fainting episodes. I'm afraid that one day my heart will stop...The officers here cannot take me to the hospital until they receive ICE authorization... I send hugs and blessings. God bless you today and forever! I love all of you. I wish God will allow me to meet you in person soon."

CCWP stands in solidarity with all the courageous women and men who offer examples of courage and resistance that can inspire us all. ■

2018 Voting Restoration Act

Initiate Justice organized a coalition called the Free To Vote Coalition, both inside prison and out, to begin the work to amend the CA State Constitution to restore voting rights to ALL CA citizens 18 or over. CCWP is part of this coalition. The Voting Restoration and Democracy Act of 2018 would restore voting rights to approximately 180,000 people currently in prison or on parole in the state, giving voice to those most affected by the criminal injustice system and reform. This is a huge effort, starting in late October, to gather almost 600,000 signatures of registered voters around the state to get an initiative on the state ballot for next November 2018. Contact CCWP or Initiate Justice to get petitions and more info: initiatejustice@gmail.com. ■

Reflections On Sanctuary

Art makes me feel human again. It is my own personal sanctuary built by strength, courage and determination. It keeps my mind and heart busy in a very healthy way. It keeps me close to freedom, to my beliefs and values. Being free on the inside is extremely important. It keeps me positive and it tends to rub off on those who come near me. Art helps me stay focused on hope, faith, love, regardless of my current circumstances.

-Valerie Juarez

Every day I walk by women who come from such different walks of life. They've lived as doctors, prostitutes, mothers, pimps, cops, slaves, batterers. I feel like we have all been victimized in our lives; it's what you choose to do about your victimization that will make or break you. I learned early on that I would not become a product of this environment, but would rise above and take as many of my sisters with me that wanted to go.

-Mimi Le, CCWF

It takes a strong individual to endure, overcome, and thrive while inside the belly of the beast (prison). Every person in the system has displayed some form of resiliency. We each resist in our own ways—we're choosing to be healthy, sober, functional, we don't give our power to the system. We don't medicate or give up. We see the glass ½ full, of hope. The persons who told their stories never gave in to suicide or complacency. They haven't let this experience in their life define who they are, it's a few steps in life's journey. If people were given tools for coping with life- options, counseling, treatment, safe havens- prisons could be eradicated.'

-Lynn Noyes aka Optimus Prime

It just so happens that part of my transformative experience at this time is to begin gardening. Symbols of positive goodwill are essential within communities in my opinion, and we have a beautiful garden in front of our unit. I don't know the names of any plants, or anything like that, but little by little I will learn. I especially enjoy the random, kind conversations with women on the yard while I am working in the garden.

At this time, I have dedicated my senior years to finding non-violent ways to enlarge areas of sanctuary and safety for non-conformists in the face of the general lawlessness and violence at all levels of society. It is more difficult to succeed nonviolently in cultures of lawlessness. However, this essay put into words for me what I feel is the core strategy—building highly functional, law-abiding, resilient micro-communities. The communities can then withstand the oppression without disintegrating from within (which is what the powerful want to happen). Achieving and maintaining these communities takes conscious intention. Maybe the free world is no different than prison now. I have learned in prison that I must consciously live a life of productive service and kindness or else I will be swallowed up by negativity.

-Donna Anderson, CCWF

Art by Valerie Juarez

From California Women's Prisons



October 2017: Some of the 36 people serving LWOP at CIW, building community and strength in supporting each other. .

It's more than easy to get stuck on all the ugliness around, but, if we stop and look, there is much beauty even among all the ugly, we just have to choose to look for it.

-Eileen Huber

My garden continues to be my peace, my balance, my place to spend time with myself. I love my own company, though I am hardly ever by myself. Sigh. It seems the garden becomes the place for outreach and I go with the flow rather than chase people off. Seems the plants, birds and flowers bring about contemplation and sharing.

I realize how much I put into the garden and how my emotions, spirituality and quality of life is impacted by having the opportunity to go outside to pull a weed or prune one of my rose bushes. I have considered what my time would feel like, how I would experience this place called prison, if I did not have the garden to work in. The reality I am discovering is that this garden has been more significant to the quality of my daily life experience in prison than I could have imagined. No wonder I pull out all of the stops and use all my resources and connections when something threatens this amazing thing called a garden.

-Michele Scott

Art by Valerie Juarez

State Auditor Report Condemns Suicide Rate at CIW

On August 17, 2017 the California State Auditor released a highly critical report on the California Department of Corrections and Rehabilitation (CDCR), highlighting its ongoing failure to implement effective suicide prevention and response policies in state prisons. The report uncovered dangerous conditions at the California Institution for Women (CIW) which led to a soaring suicide rate over the past four years. CCWP has been advocating for an investigation of the spike in suicides at CIW since 2014. We welcomed Senator Connie Leyva's request for the State Auditor to investigate this issue in August 2016 in response to compelling testimony from family members of people who died in custody at CIW.

The Auditor's Office identifies many gross failures by CDCR to comply with suicide prevention policies and practices at CIW. However, the report's recommendations focus primarily on administrative failures such as inadequate risk evaluations and treatment plans instead of confronting the systemic problems of staff neglect and abuse that people incarcerated at CIW, family members, and CCWP have identified as key to saving lives.

The report points out that the suicide rate increased following the conversion of Valley State Prison for Women (VSPW) to a men's prison in 2013 and the transfer of many women/transgender people to CIW. Disturbingly, it implies that the types of prisoners transferred led to the suicide crisis, ignoring the severe conditions exacerbated by the overcrowding that ensued at CIW. The fact that solitary confinement in the "Security Housing Unit" (SHU) at CIW was increasingly used as a way to control chaotic conditions caused by overcrowding is never mentioned. The spiraling culture of indifference, humiliation, isolation, and abuse by correctional staff and the Warden (who was forced to retire in Aug. 2016) is disregarded entirely.

Most of the recommendations developed collaboratively by CCWP advocates and people imprisoned at CIW were not included in the report, including: eliminating the abusive suicide watch/crisis bed practice; ending isolated confinement; full compliance with laws protecting imprisoned people's rights; and holding correctional officers accountable for deaths that occurred due to their deliberate indifference.



Family and advocates demand an end to suicides outside CIW in June.

On August 23, 2017, merely a week after the release of the State Auditor's report, there was yet another reported suicide at CIW. CCWP extends our heartfelt condolences to all of the families- both inside prison and out—who have lost loved ones to CDCR's gross indifference.

The conditions at CIW remain extremely dangerous and urgently require independent oversight for accountability and change. We call upon Warden Molly Hill to hold a community meeting with advocates and family members to address the abusive conditions at CIW that continue to contribute to the suicide crisis. We call upon Senator Leyva to hold a public hearing now that the report has been released to allow family, community and mental health providers to respond to the findings. Fundamental changes that address the profound systemic problems and how mental health care is provided, including oversight by a panel of community experts, are the only ways to stem this unprecedented and ongoing suicide crisis. To read the State Auditor's report visit

www.auditor.ca.gov/reports/2016-131/index.html ■

LA Letter Writing

CCWP now has a chapter in Southern California that is available to respond to letters. People, including those based at CIW, can write to this new address for support or information on resources:

CCWP-LA
PO Box 291585
LA, CA 90029

Cries for Shaylene

by Sheri Graves

*Hear my cry oh Lord;
Listen to my earnest prayer.
From the ends of the earth I call to you;
I call to you as my heart grows faint;
Lead me to the rock that is higher than I.
Psalm 61:1*

This cry is for the mothers never prepared to hear their child is gone from this earth.
With these words...

A cry that breaks the silence of dawn.
The cry of your daughter, for her very life, in the night;
A life that will end before the light of day.
This cry is for the mothers that close their eyes, in the midnight hour;
Trying to remember their child's voice calling out for them...

"Momma... "
"I need you! "
"Help me momma!"

This cry is for the women, as little girls, that were never heard.
Neglected, abused, made to feel less than, unworthy, isolated, victimized.

This cry is for the little girls that made mistakes...
now living a life, unimaginable.

A life never foreseen by their mothers,
holding their baby girl in their arms.

This is the cry of the little girl,
Now a woman,
Who everyday opens her eyes in this unimaginable place
A dark place, void of love, self-worth, humanity.
Cries from a place where there is no hope in your existence.
Today...

our cry gives voice to the forgotten, the broken,
The defeated, the lost.

Our cry gives voice to systemic injustices,
that have disregarded your lives, your potentials, and your purpose.

Today...

our cries give voice to those
no longer with us;
buried with their potential and their purpose.
The daughters, the mothers, the sisters, the aunties, the friends,
who longed for their voices to be heard again.

Our voices are fingerprints into the supernatural.
Our voice is identity to God...

Hear Our Cry Oh Lord...

The voices of those silenced too soon...

Thank You

Shaylene Antoinette Graves...

I Got You....

Love Momma...■



Light box honors Shaylene "Light Blue" Graves



Sheri Graves speaks at the CIW Vigil in June 2017

AFSC Prison Survivors Manual

The American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) Prison Watch Program is publishing a Survivors Manual written by and for women in prison. What can you share that might help another woman's survival? This could be a couple of paragraphs, a piece of artwork, a poem, or even a list; whatever survival strategy you feel most comfortable sharing. Please submit to: Bonnie Kerness, AFSC Prison Watch c/o Women, 89 Market St. 6th floor, Newark, NJ 07201.

Introducing Alisha Coleman

by Jessica Bennett-Roberts



Alisha Coleman and Hafsa Al-Amin at the CCWP Office.

I introduce to you Alisha Coleman, our new staff at the California Coalition for Women Prisoners. Alisha was introduced to CCWP through the FiredUp! group that is offered in the San Francisco County jail. At first Alisha was hesitant about the group, until she met the women of CCWP. According to Alisha there was a genuineness to the women representing CCWP that she had yet to see in the many different outside facilitated groups. Alisha is a published author of *The Fire Inside* having had a poem she had written published during the time of "Occupy San Quentin". Once Alisha was released in 2012, it seemed that fate was on her side; she was reunited with

the ladies at CCWP. It was a happen chance kind of thing where a friend she meets at the program was getting a visit from the women at CCWP. Alisha is also a member of our Spitfire Speakers Bureau, representing CCWP at community events.

Now that Alisha is a member of our staff her main focus is to be a voice to the voiceless. Her outlook on the work she does here at CCWP is that it is ongoing, each day that she makes it in to respond to the women's letters and be an advocating force for those who have no one to turn to is an accomplishment. For Alisha, the process of letter writing is not a task or a job. Alisha approaches each letter with compassion, understanding, and hopefulness, even at times becoming emotionally attached to the plight of her sisters in bondage. Being a formerly incarcerated person, Alisha knows the hurt, pain, and despair that is embodied in the experience of prison. For Alisha, this work is never ending, and is a passion and connection that will continue through her life. Her hope is that once she is gone someone else will see how much she cared and continue the work. Alisha Coleman is a fighter in this ongoing, never ending cycle of incarceration. She is a voice for those who have been silenced and an advocate for those who need her most. ■

CCWP Retreat



In September, CCWP members gathered for a retreat in Berkeley, CA. This high-energy event welcomed many formerly incarcerated members as well as members from central, northern and southern California. Throughout the weekend, the group reflected upon and strategized next steps for visiting, the campaign to end suicide watch at CIW, Drop the LWOP sentence and more.

Facts About The Felony Murder Rule

According to California courts, the felony murder rule exists as a deterrent but few people even know what the felony murder rule involves. Here are some of the facts about felony murder.

- **California's felony murder rule creates murder liability for individuals who kill another human being during the commission of what is considered a dangerous felony. It does not matter whether the killing was intentional, accidental, or negligent. It is not necessary to personally take a life to receive LWOP or the death penalty under the felony murder rule.**
- The punishment for a first-degree murder conviction under the felony murder rule can be 25 years to life, life without the possibility of parole (LWOP), or the death penalty.
- LWOP is a death sentence, even though some consider LWOP a humane alternative to the death penalty. You are sentenced to remain in prison until you die.
- California law says that you cannot be convicted of murder without malice. Malice is defined as the intent to kill, or reckless disregard for human life. Without malice, a person cannot be convicted of first degree murder. This is a far cry from the felony murder rule provisions for accomplices, where intent to kill is not necessary for conviction—only the intent to commit the underlying felony is necessary for conviction.
- All of the felonies listed in PC 190.2(a)(17) require a showing of [criminal] intent to commit the felony in order to be found guilty of the felony. Without a finding of intent on these felonies, a person cannot be convicted of murder. However, women survivors of intimate partner violence (IPV, formerly referred to as Battered Women and Battered Women's Syndrome) do not harbor criminal intent. Their "intent" is to please their batterers; their actions are for self-preservation and are fear-motivated.
- Nancy Kaser-Body, PhD, A.B.A.P., stated in her evaluation of a woman survivor of IPV who was sentenced to LWOP:
"Testimony about the dynamics of a batterer and a battered woman's response would have helped the jury understand why she was with Mr. 'X' and had not escaped, to understand that the crime was not the product of **shared intent** (emphasis added), but that of a murderous and mentally ill man and a fearful, passive woman, to decide if she truly 'aided and abetted' the murder, or simply was too immobilized to resist."
- Though many strides have been made for survivors of IPV in the legal arena, many still fall between the cracks and ultimately pay a harsh price for the actions of their batterers.
- The majority of women serving LWOP are survivors of abuse, including intimate partner violence, childhood abuse, sexual violence and trafficking.
- The majority of women sentenced to LWOP are first-time offenders, and had no previous record prior to being sentenced to die in prison.
- 90% of women serving LWOP were sentenced under the felony murder rule as aiders and abettors. They were not the main actor in the crime, and/or were forced to be present when someone else committed a murder.
- A person sentenced to LWOP at age 20 can spend well over 50 years in prison before their death sentence is fulfilled.
- In the past few years, legislation has been passed giving people with LWOP and life term sentences who committed their crime prior to the age of 18 the opportunity for legal relief on their sentences. Also, legislation has passed recently giving extra consideration to youth who committed offenses before they were 23 years old (up from 18 years). However, people with LWOP were not included in this age expansion.
- Recent case rulings (such as in re Banks and in re Miller) offer potential sentence relief to people with LWOP sentences under the felony murder rule. Unfortunately, many who could seek relief under these rulings are overlooked because they do not have information about them and/or do not have funds for legal representation. ■

Support *The Fire Inside*

If you are not in prison, are getting *The Fire Inside* in the mail and have NOT made a donation in the past year, please do it now! See address info on back page.

Artists from CCWF Honor Yuri Kochiyama

In May 2017, two CCWP members from CCWF participated in an art exhibition in San Francisco honoring Yuri Kochiyama - Sara Lara with a painting and Natalie DeMola with a poem. Kochiyama was a Japanese-American revolutionary activist who gave life to Che Guevara's statement that, "the true revolutionary is guided by a great feeling of love." *Shifting Movements: Art Inspired by the Life & Activism of Yuri Kochiyama (1921-2014)* was cosponsored by the Asian American Women Artists Association (AAWAA) and the Asian Pacific Islander Cultural Center (APICC). CCWP friend and contributor, Sonny Ramirez (currently incarcerated at San Quentin) also had paintings in this show.



CCWP Member Annie Paradise stands next to Sara Lara's painting at the exhibition in San Francisco.

Trapeze, For Yuri Kochiyama **By Natalie DeMola , CCWF**

Before I came to prison I was in a mental bondage
Yet physically free. Now I'm physically in bondage
And internally free. I didn't have a voice
And it felt like receiving Life without the Possibility of
Parole
At the age of sixteen would really mean
That I'd be silenced forever.

But today my handcuff is loosened
Just a little
For my voice to be heard.
It is you who reads that give my words life
And true meaning. If it weren't for you
My words would just be words but instead
It now filters through your mind
And touches your heart and creates meaning.

Through me, a testimony can be given
Without you having to experience remorse and pain.
And through your freedom
You can bring on the change that I cannot physically do.
Everyone is connected in some sort of way.
But for me it is those that discover me
That allow me to continue to live.
Violence, suicide, and oppression is the environment
I had to grow up in. Yet I learned
That life is like a trapeze. I must swing
From the bar of hopelessness and grief
To the next bar of hope that sometimes
Is not really there. But it's the hope
I must create in my mind
To survive. ■

A thank you note from Lynn Noyes (CCWF), who recently lost her beloved daughter:

I would like to say thank you for all the love, light, prayers and support. I would not be hanging on to the thread I am without it. Hopefully I will be able to put up a photo of me with the grandkids this year. Now it is just a waiting game to get the grand-babies Shaylynn and Rosalee here. With a heart full of hurt and gratitude,

Lynn,
P.S. Optimus Prime (Lynn Noyes)

Remembering Rose Braz



Rose Braz made her transition on May 2, 2017 after a long, fierce battle with cancer. Rose was a co-founder of Critical Resistance and CURB and was active in many other organizations that sought to build a strong opposition to policing and incarceration throughout California and nationally. CCWP was honored to have Rose as a member of our Advisory Board for the past ten years. As an Advisory Board member, Rose brought the same passion, vision, dedication and humor to supporting work for women and trans people in prison that she brought to every facet of movement work that she touched. Rose possessed a rare combination of vision and pragmatism that allowed her to discover opportunities for change in unlikely places. Even in the last few years when she was struggling with her illness, she continued to be there for CCWP, setting an example of collective caring, fierce advocacy and radical optimism in the face of daunting obstacles. **Rose Braz presente! ■**

Subscribe to San Quentin News

In April 2017, CCWP members Hafsa Al-Amin and Pam Fadem spent a day with the staff of the San Quentin News (SQN), an incredibly talented, professional and committed group of people. We talked about journalism, California prisons and the work for human and civil rights for all incarcerated and formerly incarcerated. A huge thank you to all the SQN dedicated staff. We also note with sadness, the tragic death of Arnulfo Garcia on Sept. 23, 2017 in a car accident two months after his release from prison. Arnulfo, a man of great compassion and vision, was editor-in-chief of SQN. We encourage people inside to write articles for the SQN and everyone outside to get a paid subscription to support the work of SQN. To donate or subscribe, visit sanquentinnews.com or write to: San Quentin News, 1 Main Street, San Quentin, CA 94964. ■

Holiday Community Give Back

All of Us Or None, a project of Legal Services for Prisoners with Children, is sponsoring an annual holiday event to give bikes and gifts to children with parents in CA jails and prisons. To sponsor the purchase of a bicycle or to help at the event, send donations to: AOUON/LSPC Community Giveback, 1540 Market St. #490, SF, CA 94102 and prisonerswithchildren.org. ■

California Coalition for Women Prisoners invites and encourages all women and transgender people who have been or are inside women's prisons to send us your writing, letters, artwork, or poetry.

Our next issue will focus on transgender and gender non-conforming experiences inside California women's prisons. We are seeking stories, art and poetry for future issues dedicated to this theme.

We will not use your name unless you check the box below:

I want my name to appear in the newsletter

Name: _____

Mail to: _____

I would like to get the next issue of *The Fire Inside*



Network on Women in Prison
California Coalition for Women Prisoners
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San Francisco, CA 94102

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Maria Alicia MOVE organization, died in prison 1998

Come work with us!

CCWP volunteer nights are on the 1st Wednesday of every month at 6 p.m. 1540 Market St., Room 490, San Francisco
Contact us: (415) 255-7036 x4
www.womenprisoners.org
Fax: (415) 552-3150,
Email: info@womenprisoners.org

CCWP Mission

CCWP is a grassroots social justice organization, with members inside and outside prison, that challenges the institutional violence imposed on women, transgender people and communities of color by the prison industrial complex (PIC). We see the struggle for racial and gender justice as central to dismantling the PIC, and we prioritize the leadership of the people, families and communities most impacted in building this movement.

Funded in part by Alcibie Alliance, CJI/Solidago, Folsom Street Fair, Friends with Benefits, Left Tilt, Morningstar, People's Life Fund 2017, Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, Soul Time! Dance Party, Vagina Monologues UC Berkeley, Women's Foundation RGHR Giving Circle

Yes, I want to support women prisoners!

- Please contact me to volunteer
- Enclosed is \$25 contribution to help send a newsletter subscription to a woman in prison
- Enclosed is my contribution of \$ _____

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone/email: _____

Please make checks payable to: CCWP/LSPC, 1540 Market St., Room 490, San Francisco, CA 94102